CANA
Isaiah 62:2-5
John 2:1-11
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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

The more I thought about the New Testament Lesson this morning, the more it seemed as if it had been written and preserved down through the centuries precisely for the edification of modern Presbyterians. The more I thought about the text the more I found it addressing and challenging three basic assumptions that are rather common to Presbyterian Christians. Those assumptions are:

- God is remote -
- God is solemn -
- God may be interested in changing the Pentecostal and Fundamentalist types; but the idea of regeneration, change, recreation, is not very important with us.

Now, I'm assuming that these three attitudes, or assumptions are deeply engraved in the Presbyterian mentality, and in our self-defense, I think we need to acknowledge that there is justification for our position - at least in part.

God's remoteness - a product of our understanding of God as the Holy, the totally other, the awesome, mysterious ground of all being and creator of all that is. Historically, Presbyterians have held out for a God who is God. And it has always seemed wrong theologically, and in bad taste socially to presume too much about our status with him. If God is remote to Presb yterians, at least part of the reason is that we are uneasy getting too cozy with the "Ground of All Being".

God's solemnity - a product of our intellectual approach to the faith. Our forte, as Presbyterians, has been theology - a faith that is well-reasoned and thought out: a Gospel that appeals to the mind as well as the heart: a religion that can coexist with the academic disciplines of philosophy, psychology and science in the rarified air of the University. And

so our God - and we - have been solemn: but in the process we have done something that no other tradition has been able to do as well.

God's power to change people - again a product of our mentality. Traditionally we have seen the Gospel's ability to change people in terms of a growth process; a daily becoming that takes place minute by minute, hour by hour. And so, we've always been uneasy with the instantaneous conversion: the one-shot upheaval that turns a man around in his tracks.

In all three of these basic Presbyterian positions there is a danger, however. The danger that what we end up with is a God so remote that he isn't real; a God so solemn that his presence is confined to suitably solemn occasions - like funerals; and a faith that elliminates the possibility of our changing in response to God, in any way whatever.

The story of Cana addresses each. But first, a word about the underlying issue - at least for the Presbyterian mentality. Did it really happen? Did the water actually become wine? Some people take the literal approach which dictates that if it's in the Bible it happened - and that's that. Others take the allegorical approach and maintain that the story was created in order to tell another story. And others, of course, are embarrassed by the whole thing and simply ignore it. It's simply so unlikely, so impossible to squeeze into our categories of thinking: and then there's all that wine.

Two points are helpful here. In the Gospel of John miracles play a different role from the Synoptics-Matthew, Mark, Luke. In John, miracles are called "signs". The emphasis is never on the miraculous act itself; but always on that to which the sign is pointing - namely Jesus Christ. He is the miracle - the only miracle that matters.

Second - if we understand that about the author of the fourth Gospel, the important question is never "did it happen?" but "what does it mean? - what does the author want us to understand? - What is God's word for me in this story?"

Now, let's look again at the intricacies of what transpired, according to John, when Jesus and his little group of followers - including his mother - accepted an invitation to attend a wedding celebration in Cana.

They were close friends with the family. Mary knew the servants well enough to issue an order. She was on intimate terms with the hostess - so much so that she felt the deep embarassment of her dear friend when a real social calamity occurred. The wine ran out. "No greater catastrophe could strike the heart of hospitable people hosting so gala an affair", is the way one commentator described it. They were late, obviously. The wedding celebrations of the time lasted seven days: the fact that the wine was gone means that the party had been in full-swing for some time.

Then, there is a difficult exchange between May and Jesus - which, unfortunately, in English comes off too abruptly and harshly. "O Woman, what have you to do with me?" doesn't do it justice at all. The sen e of it is - "let's not get upset about it."

In any case, Jesus told the servants to fill six stone jars with water. The text contains an explanatory note at this point: the jars were for the Jewish rite of purification. Simply put, when a guest arrived he bathed in the water. It was a social custom and a religious law. The fact that they were empty is another indication that the party was several days old.

So the jars were filled - somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons - quite a bit when you think about it: a fact that has always driven the temperance people to distraction. For if there is anything more unlikely than serving up 180 gallons of wine at a party - it is serving that volume of unfermented grape juice.

The Steward, a professional maitre de and toastmaster, took the first sip and discovered immediately that it was wine - good wine. So good that he couldn't resist a jab typical of professional snobs. "This isn't done! You don't keep the best till last - you serve it first. And after your

guests have drunk freely you pull out the inferior, cheaper variety. At that point they don't know the difference."

And the party proceeded, with Jesus and friends as participants. Now, lay that beside the three assumptions to which I called you attention initially.

First - God's remoteness. It's not too difficult to think of God being concerned about the establishment of peace in the Middle East. It's not too difficult to pray for the success of the United Nations and to see God's beneficence descending on that global institution. But we have a little trouble understanding God in terms of the conflict we are having with our children or our neighbor. It's not too difficult to understand God's compassion for the masses of hungry, suffering humanity. But somehow that doesn't always connect in our mind with a family that depends on the Welfare Department and Food Pantry for sustenance.

But here is Jesus, in this story, getting involved in a problem that is terribly trivial. It was embarassing, to be sure. But certainly, we can't call it a major calamity for anyone but the hosts. And that, I think, is precisely the point. God cares about us - and what matters most to us. There is nothing trivial in his eyes about something that causes us to hurt. Our prayers, that is to say, don't have to be decorated with flowery, Shakespearian phrases, focusing on grand designs and universal hopes. They are quite legitimate - and quite audible - if they simply hold up to our Father God those matters that concern us most.

That's the point: that's the miracle. One writer put it this way.... "the great God of heaven, identifies with the beer-drinking, bonanza-watching, all-in-the-family consumer, the inconsiderate guests, the fastidious caterer,the distraught host, the buzzing servants."

That's first: God is awesome, mysterious and holy. But he came among us - not in a philosophic thesis, but in the flesh: in the life of a man who cared about something so trivial as the wine running out.

God's solemnity. The story is an eloquent commentary on God's attitude toward life. It was a real party - a real celebration - a seven day, joyous, feast - that needed 180 gallons of wine just to keep it going. John the Baptist wouldn't have been caught dead at that affair. And neither would many contemporary followers of Jesus. Somewhere along the 2,000 year line of Christian history we came up with the idea - borrowed from Greek philosophy, actually - that religion and pleasure, physical pleasure - eating, drinking, feeling good pleaseure - are contradictory. Somewhere we got the idea that having fun and feeling good is incompatible with Christian Faith. The monks in the Middle Ages did everytying possible to make themselves miserable - on the assumption that we're closer to God's will for us when we feel bad. And while we don't go to that extreme - in fact, we are rather enamoured with the pursuit of pleasure - we don't make the connection in our mind that God graces our high and joyous moments as well as the low and sad moments.

How would you paint the face of God? This story portrays a God who can laugh, deeply, heartily: anGod with a twinkle in his eye who likes it when life is affirmed and enjoyed. Certainly our Presbyterian insistance on solemnity and sobrietyis important: but not to the point that our God is grim. For here is his son at a party - with old and good friends, sharing their joy at one of the really important and happy times of life.

God's ability to change people - I think this is the most important meaning in the story. George Eliot expressed impatience with "those whose celestial intimacies seem not to improve their domestic manners." The Gospel of Jesus Christ has always been enfeebled by the fact that it seems to have made no difference in the lives of many of its adherents. The story of Cana describes a God whose primary business with men is to change them: to recreate them: to take the tepid water of their spirits and change it into zestful, colorful wine. The story of Cana tells of a God who has the power to do just that.

I think we need occassionally to be reminded that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has powerfully influenced the history of civilization. William Barclay reminds us that Christianity - God working through his people - altered history by holding out for the worth of every human being. Barclay points out that in pre-Christian Rome, forty infants were abandoned nightly on the steps of the Forum to be picked up in the morning: the boys to be raised in the school for gladiators - the girls for the brothels. And that it was no big thing for a master to crucify a slave for drawing the bath water too hot. Overly dramatic? Not really. Because Jesus Christ and his people changed it.

But it's at the intimate personal level that we do our stumbling. A first grade church school class had been talking about the men who followed Jesus. Reviewing the lesson the next Sunday the teacher asked what these people were called. One child eagerly raised his hand. "The recycles," he exclaimed. (Alive Now - Jan/Feb. 74. P.6)

And that is what he did with those men: took the raw material of their lives and remade them into useful, corageous and joyful servants. That's what the story of Cana holds up for us. The people of the New Testament keep bursting in on us, crying "We're found it! The thing for which the whole would is looking - we've found it and it works" (A.J. Gossip, Interpreters Bible)

But we keep it at arms length. We're not sure about it. We're not sure we want to be disturbed - changed - re-created. We may not be altogether happy with who we are; but we're very uncomfortable with the suggestion that God himself might make us into something else.

Frederick Nietzsche stood outside the faith throwing his brilliant barbs at the lack of integrity he saw at precisely this point. He wrote; "They must sing better songs ere I learn belief in their Savior: his disciples must look like the saved." (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, P.82)

That's the issue, and it always will be. We touch it - weekly - ever so gently "If a man is in Christ, he is a new person altogether. The old is dead and gone: everything has become fresh and new...Friends, believe the Good news of the Gospel.....In Jesus Christ we are forgiven". Ever so gently: but there in that sentence is the very essence of the Gospel -"If a man is in Christ he is a new person altogether."

I watched the first part of a Television Series on Religion in America last Sunday night, partly out of a sense of duty. The first segment was ok Pentecostalism, and it showed much of what I find distasteful and excessive and wrong in that approach to the Gospel. But near the end it included an interview with a young woman, painfully unrehearsed. She wasn't very literate: she was too cute - but she talked openly about the change in her life caused by her religious experience. She said: "it seems such a shame that a man like him had to die for me" and then she broke down and wept, quite unprofessionally.

When last were you moved to tears by Jesus Christ? When last did you allow your religion to get at you at that level? We're embarrassed by that degree of intensity - that level of honesty - that simplicity that says "I belong to Jesus Christ - and I intend to be his disciple."

And so the Pentecostal Churches are full - and we sit smugly in our own half empty sanctuaries. And across the world Pentecostalism is experiencing incredible growth, as the Presbyterians bring home one hundred more missionaries.

"We will be listened to," Arthur John Gossip once said. "when we demonstrate to those outside that we have something infinitely valuable that they lack. " (I.B.P.494, Vol.8)

God is near. God graces our high moments and shares our joys. God can enrich our lives - bringing peace, meaning, joy. He can change us. That is the Gospel. AMEN

PRAYER

Father, our intentions often outstretch our courage. We mean well, but we hesitate to be open - all the way - to you and your love and your will. Help us to overcome that. Help us to learn your closeness; your presence in our high moments and ~~M~~ low moments. And give us that courage to be your willing and faithful people: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN